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Geraldine Margaret Sanderson, aged 25.

## A New Conrad Letter: to Geraldine Sanderson (1894)

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JOSEPH CONRAD'S MEETING with Edward Lancelot Sanderson on the *Torrens* in March 1893 initiated not only a life-long friendship with "Ted" himself but also led to close relations with other members of the Sanderson family. Conrad's correspondence includes letters to Ted Sanderson, his wife Helen (née Watson), his mother Katherine, and his sister Agnes. To these we can now add the letter printed here for the first time, to another sibling, Geraldine Sanderson. It appears thanks to the generosity of Mrs Susan Jefford, grand-daughter of Geraldine Sanderson.

Geraldine Margaret Sanderson (January 1877–December 1957) was one of sixteen Sanderson children (of whom Ted was the eldest).<sup>1</sup> She was nearly eighteen when she received this letter, which is the earliest example so far discovered of Conrad's correspondence with the Sandersons and thus a first glimpse of his crucial relationship with this large boisterous English family who owned and ran Elstree Preparatory School. The letter's buoyant, familiar, and playful tone is also consistent with a moment of early success for Conrad: on 4 October, T. Fisher Unwin had accepted *Almayer's Folly* for publication, and on 10 October he returned the manuscript to the firm with final revisions and discussed terms (CL1 177, 180).

Conrad's letter is written in response to one from Geraldine Sanderson that reached him while he was in Switzerland for hydrotherapy during August and early September. (It was during this visit that he began work on what would become *An Outcast of the Islands*.) It also refers to a hitherto unknown visit to the Sanderson home at

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<sup>1</sup> She was born in Edgeware, Middlesex, and her baptism on 7 May registered at Elstree, Hertford. She married Henry Leeds Harrison in 1903 and died in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire. Three of the sixteen children died before Conrad met the family.

Elstree: Conrad bemoans Geraldine's absence from the gathering due to illness the previous day, "yesterday after dinner," when he seems to have been ribbed by the family and hence writes in mock annoyance. The register is significant, demonstrating an ear for English humour and an already-assured sense of comic intonation and playful self-performance. The quotations from Shakespeare and Scott support the impression of the Sandersons as a literate and literary family, an impression underscored by Conrad's faith in using Ted and his mother as unofficial copy-editors for his work-in-progress, including both *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast*.

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**To Geraldine Sanderson**

Text MS Private collection; Unpublished

[London]  
21<sup>st</sup> Oct. 94.

Dear Miss Geraldine.

I must now answer the letter You have been good enough to write to me in the days of my affliction, when I was undergoing discipline – water discipline – in the wilds of Switzerland.<sup>2</sup> Unkind Fates (and the wooden headed imbecile who managed my hotel) have deprived me of Your autograph, but nothing can rob me of the feelings of gratitude towards the writer Herself. I wish to put them down in black and white here. I am well aware that it should be done (to be durable) on parchment with Indian ink, but, really, there is not a bit of donkey's skin anywhere on the premises (unless I was to take a piece of my own, yet I lack the courage and the necessary lancet) and as to Indian ink! . . . India is very far away and I couldn't be back in time for the post. – Stephens' Writing Fluid<sup>3</sup> will do – perhaps. I knew the man who invented the formula and was then starving while Stephens made his own fortune with the Fluid. Such is the fate of inventors! – so

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<sup>2</sup> Conrad stayed as usual at the Hôtel de la Roseraie in Champel in order to undergo hydrotherapy.

<sup>3</sup> The "blue-black writing fluid" that became famous as Stephens' ink was invented by Henry Stephens (1796–1864) in 1832.

he said. We wept together for a while and I lent him half-a-crown (2s 6d) to “save his Wife and little children from starvation” – so he said. Later on I met him in the street. His face was flushed and he walked unsteadily – from emotion probably. Still later on a mutual acquaintance informed me that he had no wife and no children of any size; big or little. The next day I met him again. He cut me dead. Then I wept alone while gazing upon his immoral back which shook with laughter – I am afraid. Remorse is a much quieter emotion. It must have been laughter; alas! – Ah! Well! Such is life. We go forth into the world, our hearts full of kindness and our hands full of half-crowns and some inventor comes along and takes us in, half-crowns, kind heart and all! Disgusting. Let this be a lesson to You. Beware of inventors! –

I am – from purely selfish motives – very sorry that You were absent from the drawing room yesterday after dinner. Your presence might have have [*sic*] prevented the most scandalous outrage of the Nineteenth Century. A man without guile; (a friend of mine – You understand) a modest, well meaning, retiring, bashful, peaceful creature (You recognize him already? Don’t you?) has been murdered under the circumstances of most revolting cruelty. He has been caught in a cruel and cunning trap, he has been poisoned with malicious innuendo, pierced with the dagger of merciless mockery (I am not sure about the spelling) shot at with the arrows of atrocious sarcasm. In fact stuck full of them. While he lay gasping he was accused (O! refinement of horror) of having feathers and – of ruffling them; (You can hardly believe it! Can You?) his self respect was torn from him and trampled upon before his very eyes (Don’t cry please!) and while he – poor worm – writhed helplessly he was asked to make jokes – for Punch\* (Incredible. Isn’t it?) . . . No! I will not the harrowing tale unfold any more.<sup>4</sup> Let this peep suffice.

\* For the elucidation of anything that may appear obscure in the above relation of facts send a stamped, addressed, envelope to Miss Agnes Sanderson.<sup>5</sup> Elstree. Herts who will answer all inquiries – from conscientious motives.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. “I could a tale unfold whose lightest word / Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood” (*Hamlet* I.v.15–6).

<sup>5</sup> Agnes Mary Warner Sanderson (1875–1936), one of Geraldine’s older sisters, was a special favourite of Conrad’s and the recipient of several letters from him.



Geraldine Margaret Sanderson, aged 25.

When You come downstairs again<sup>1</sup> – and may it be soon, for the greater joy of your servant – look at the carpet before Your Mother’s writing table. There must be some trace. There the mangled victim lay, before it was gathered up and sent off in a fly to catch the 10.58 train. It went “unwept, unhonoured, unsung”!<sup>2</sup> Only in the darkness of the sloppy fields an exiled dog howled mournfully, the rapid black clouds arrested in their course veiled the face of the sorrowful moon and sent down penetrating tears of drizzling rain upon the hearse – fly I mean – as it slowly climbed the muddy hill. The railway porters stood bare-headed. The station master was the only mourner and the shriek of the wild, untamed locomotive was the funereal dirge of what once used to be an average, inoffensive man. –

But why further dissemble? I have been telling you the story of my own destruction – the story of a dark and gruesome deed! Yes. The old spirit is dead. The old playful, innocent, loving, foolish spirit is dead. I am filled now with gloomy wisdom and with a sombre desire for vengeance. To-morrow I shall sally forth early and begin the malignant day by boxing the ears of a nice, little, civil boy – the bootblack on the corner. He is small and helpless – he shall suffer! Then I shall seek out the mildest and meekest of my friends. They had better beware! The day before yesterday I was a victim – the day after to-morrow I shall be a tormentor. I shall misinterpret their words, mock their protestations, accuse them of having feathers, urge them to make jokes for Punch; they shall squirm under the lash of my satire. Their trustful confidence shall be made the instrument of their destruction. They are polite and well meaning. Let them perish!

I wonder whether I am a donkey or a philosopher (What was it You were pleased to observe? You have made up your mind. Oh! Have You? Well *I* haven’t – not yet) But supposing even that the most unfavourable view of my personality prevails, I must point out that the animal in question has spoken wisely once. No doubt the frequentation of prophets is improving, but life, even a prophet-less one, teaches many a lesson and instills wisdom by the brutal process known as knocking about. Hard knocks is only another name for acquired sagacity. The donk— I mean the

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<sup>1</sup> Another reference to Geraldine and illness occurs in Conrad’s letter to Ted Sanderson of 14 October 1897, where he refers to her as “Miss Gery” (CL1 397).

<sup>2</sup> Sir Walter Scott, “The Lay of the Last Minstrel” (Canto VI, l. 16).

animal above alluded to, gets plenty of that. As to the philosophers everybody knows that they do nothing but talk. It's expected of them. So whichever way You make up Your mind I am entitled to speak. Do you give in to my logic? Very well, then. –

And now – O! Shame! I have nothing to say. Perish the day when . . . But stay. Every story has its moral. I have told You and pointed only one moral. You have a right to another. Let's see. We must look for it. Does not seem to have any. Never mind, a petition will do instead. A humble petition addressed to You.

Be charitable. Be charitable with the supreme mercy that in the unlovely jumble of human motives finds only the best and holding it up in the light of day proclaims its belief in the good that never dies. Be charitable with the keen eyed perception that can see the diamond in the deep mud, the gold in the dark and noisome mine. Woollen clothing is good but a benevolent heart is better. With one you give only warmth – with the other you give the very sunshine. For the one you will get human gratitude – a worthless thing; the other will secure for you human love – a thing of great worth – in this world, and the Incomparable Reward in the next. –

But those things You know; yet I must say all my say. Charity to a woman is like the perfume to a flower, the ethereal charm that completes the beauty of colour and of form, the subtle and far reaching delight that lingers in memory and in the heart, unforgotten even in moments when all other things are forgotten. And of the the [sic] three great virtues charity is the one tha[t] holds the world. Faith is for yourself; Love may be wasted – abused – may die. But in the steadfast compassion of the strong lays the salvation of the weak. –

And all this is one great commonplace gush. Respect my grey hairs (I have sixteen of them. Counted them this morning to chasten my rebellious spirit. It is a sobering occupation I can assure You) respect – I say – my grey hairs and forgive the commonplaces. That also would be Charity. Therefore be charitable.

And Your Petitioner will ever pray!<sup>3</sup>

I must really be serious now. The sting of what-you-call 'em is in its tail and the whole purpose of my letter is in its end. I

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. “Your petitioners shall ever pray for your Majesty’s most prosperous reign.” This petition is something of a historical commonplace, directed towards royalty and parliament.



wanted to tell you how sincerely glad I was to hear yesterday that you were much better and my gladness suddenly bubbled over eight pages and shall cost me two pence and You a headache. Man is a harmful creature. Still You need not read it all. If You only have the brilliant idea to begin at the end You need not go beyond this page at all. –

I hope that on my next visit to Elstree I shall have the happiness to congratulate you personally on Your return to the world where a certain insignificant individual has missed You much.

I am, dear Miss Geraldine, Your most obedient faithful Servant  
J. C. Korzeniow[s]ki

### **Acknowledgements**

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